CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
SPEECH AT HAMILTON COLLEGE SCIENCE BUILDING DEDICATION
September 30, 2005

It's an honor to be with you tonight to dedicate this impressive new science center, which is, I'm told, the largest construction project in the college's distinguished history.

With the dedication of this building, Hamilton College is making a very tangible commitment to the study of science that will benefit this college, our community and indeed the entire nation.

I don't make that comment lightly. I've spent the past week in Washington trying to block a bill that would undermine the Endangered Species Act. Throughout the debate on that bill, everyone on all sides of the issue kept saying they wanted our policy on endangered species to be based on the best science. It's just that the bill itself didn't give much of a role to scientists.

Worse still, you should have heard some of the assertions that were thrown around during the debate. At one hearing before the Resources Committee, one Member suggested that we don't really need these species around because we can just extract their DNA and reconstitute them if they prove to be useful later. I'm not exaggerating.

The statement combined the worst of both worlds when it comes to the political application of science – an excessive and blind faith in the use of science to control the world, oddly paired with a complete ignorance and insensitivity to what science is able to teach us about the world around us. Not very reassuring.

Now why do I mention this? It's not just so that you will "share my pain" of recent days. It's because the debate – if we can call it that – over endangered species highlights how important it is for Americans to be able to understand the basics of science if we are to have informed public discussion of key issues.

I am so pleased that a leader in liberal education like Hamilton College understands that science has to be a central part of that education. And I am so proud to have that recognition of science in our own backyard.

Every student, no matter what their major, needs to have a passing understanding of science in today's world – if only to function as a citizen. I could spend hours just listing the issues I have to confront every day that revolve around questions of science – climate change, stem cells, evolution, cybersecurity, nanotechnology; the list goes on and on.

(Luckily, I have a staff that can guide me through these thickets, but I don't think Congress is going to be willing to provide a staff for every voter.)

The essayist E.B. White once defined democracy as "the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time." The odds of that being so can only decline if students don't acquire the basic tools they need to analyze public issues.

So as a public official, I feel I have a great stake in what will happen in this building.

And I think this building will contribute to the public good in another way, beyond helping to create a scientifically literate citizenry.

Another problem we talk about in Washington all the time is that the U.S. doesn't have enough scientists and engineers for the workforce of the 21st Century. Well, as the Science Committee chairman, I happen to know the sorry statistics about education all too well – how interest in science declines at every grade level.

But here's something else I know, smaller, liberal arts colleges have the best record in producing students who go on to get Ph.D.s in science, math and engineering.

The percentage of students who continue their technical studies is far higher at smaller colleges than it is at research universities. And this building should make working in those fields even more appealing. So I expect this building to be a great breeding ground for future scientists and engineers – only metaphorically, I assume.

There's every reason to believe it will be because of the incredible record that Hamilton College has in developing top-notch science programs. I was pleased to learn, for example, of the work of Professor George Shields, who has made Hamilton a leader in computational chemistry, and has brought to Hamilton high performance computing power unavailable at any other undergraduate institution in the nation.

I was especially pleased with that example because I have sat through many hearings on our Science Committee learning how computation has become the third pathway of scientific research, supplementing theory and experimentation. And we've pushed the National Science Foundation (NSF), which funded Dr. Shields, to give greater emphasis to high performance computing.

I've also been told of the research of Professor Eugene Domack, and his great work taking students to Antarctica. I have been there myself to see the U.S. research outposts, and I can't imagine a more inspiring place for undergraduate travel. If someone wasn't hooked on science after that, it's hard to imagine what would do the trick.

I was also pleased to learn of the work of Professor David Gapp, who is studying the Utica Marsh, an overlooked resource right here in our own area, which I've been trying to preserve and to open up to greater public access.

My point in all this is not just to show you what a good job your Hamilton staff has done regaling me with tales of the college's achievements – and I know there are many more examples I can cite. My point is that if you bring creative professors together with dedicated students in a first-class facility, as you can now do, the potential is infinite.

And Hamilton College can show the nation how to have an effective undergraduate research and education program in the sciences.

But I want to ask everyone here – especially those of you from out of town – to promise to do something to show that you understand how meaningful an achievement this building is.

What I want you to do is to dedicate yourselves to do whatever you can to ensure the continued success of the kinds of programs that will fund the work that will go on in this building.

Congress will decide over the next month or so how much money the National Science Foundation will receive in fiscal 2006. NSF will have to struggle for every cent it can get in this budget environment, even though the agency is widely respected on Capitol Hill.

I'm not asking you to lobby me – I already support the Foundation and its programs. But those of you who have access to other federal officials, please write and tell them you were just at this great new building at Hamilton College and that you want to see it used fully. And we need the research and education support of NSF to do that.

Well, you didn't come here to hear about politics; you probably didn't even come here to listen to a politician. So I should probably stop there. But I want to congratulate everyone involved with the renovation of this historic building. It represents exactly what a college should do – draw on the past to prepare for the future. And I look forward to seeing the students who will benefit from it.

I hope they will learn to approach the natural world with humility and awe, and also with curiosity and open-mindedness, so that they can be informed and productive citizens. The great physicist I. I. Rabi said that when he was a little boy, his mother would ask him, “Did you ask any good questions at school today?”

That’s the kind of student I hope will pass through this building and the kind of attitude that you will inculcate within its walls. And with this building, those students will have more of the tools they need to start answering their questions. I look forward to those answers.

Thank you and congratulations.